



# HISTORICAL BASIS OF RUSSIA (SOVIET UNION)-SOUTH ASIA REALIGNMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The Soviet took keen interest in the South Asian sub-continent much before from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Czarist Russia occupied the entire landmass presently known as central Asia and was in search of further expansion southwards. At the time British were the formidable force in the Indian subcontinent and they had strengthened their rule in the part of the world (Ahmar 1989). At the juncture, English got concerned about the threat being posed by czarist Russia to their empire in the sub-continent, and prompted them to pay attention towards it. In order to torpedo the czarist ambition towards South Asia, they decided to intervene in Afghanistan to make it the buffer between the two hostile powers of the time (Chandra 2004). This paper tries to trace the contours of the historical posturing of Soviet Union towards significant South Asian region of the world and its contemporary geopolitical ramifications.

**KEYWORDS:** Soviet Union, Geopolitics, South Asia, Balancing.

### British India and Czarist Russia

The Tzarist Russia was never in a mood to help Indian nationalist in their bid to throw of the colonial yoke till they were in rule in Russia. But the situation changed drastically to Indian favor when the Soviet regime admitted the legitimate rights of the oppressed people world over to self-rule. Here India also got special assistance and favor from Soviet Union in the fight against imperialism and colonialism. Kaushik Basu (1971) held the contention, "the Leninist policy of friendship with the colonial people of Asia made a great impact upon freedom fighters in India and elsewhere." The statement shows the impact of Soviet revolution on the freedom struggle in the colonized world crawling under the white man burden.

The October revolution gave huge impetus to the freedom movements all over the world including India. It was endorsed in the Indian Constitutional Reform Report came out in 1918 when it referred to the October Revolution which has "given an impetus to Indian political aspiration." The basic contribution, however, was that industrial workers and peasantry were drawn into India's freedom struggle in huge numbers, thus broadening the base of the struggle. This is an undisputed fact that to a larger extent the national movement was inspired by the October revolution. Contrastingly, as against the principles of Marxist ideology, Lenin backed the then bourgeois leaders of Indian National Movement due to their ante imperialist character. (Bakshi 1999:2)

The Communist party of India (CPI), established at Tashkent in October 1920 by a group of Indian political exiles pioneered by M. N. Roy, made strategy for an attack on India, yet nothing happened on the ground. M. N. Roy attempted to impact Lenin's way to deal with the colonial question and requested him not to trust elitist bourgeoisie national struggle leaders like Gandhi and to back just a proletariat party. However, Roy did not succeed, and Lenin kept on sympathizing with every single national struggle leaders determined to uproot imperialism and colonialism. These nationalistic sympathies buried with the demise of Lenin. Stalin indicated minimal enthusiasm or interest for these issues. It was just during the Second World War that Moscow demonstrated a passing enthusiasm for India and after that just to direct Indian Communists to work together with the Soviet Union's British allies. Along these lines, socialism in India rose up out of the Second World War altogether disparaged, and Indian patriots were certain to take a peek at the Soviet Union. It incidentally happened that Indian autonomy coincided with the Soviet declaration of the theory of the "two camps" in 1947. The did not augur well for Indo-Soviet relations, and it appeared that India and the Soviet Union were to stay uneasy partners even after the departure of the British (Rothermund 1969: 79).

India got independence in 1947 after a prolonged national liberation movement. The sad part of the independence was the partition of the subcontinent leading to the creation of two independent nations rather than unified and integrated India. The particular event created disenchantment among the Soviet leadership which had envisaged the emergence of one single state called India. Soviet leadership viewed the partition a consequence of British policy of "Divide and Rule" and raised serious doubts over the genuineness of the real independence of the state of Pakistan. What Soviet called the partition a mere deal between Indian and British bourgeoisie imperialists. (Jain 1974:31)

The next major issue immediately after the independence which was major headwind in the relation between USSR and India was the issue of Non-Alignment Movement. Here, India found herself in the fix when it earned the criticism of

both west and Soviet Union for mooted and actively pursuing advocating the principle of non-alignment in international affairs. The Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru announced in 1949 the joining of Commonwealth and subsequent acceptance of an invitation to visit United States of America. These two moves upset the Soviet leadership and hatched the suspicion of India falling into western leap. As a response to these developments and to offset the India's closeness with western world, Soviet Union invited the then Pakistani Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan to visit Moscow. But the invitation could not materialize and Liaquat Ali Khan chose to visit Washington instead of Moscow. The preference of Washington to Moscow by Pakistani Premier did not go well with Moscow leadership and Pakistan lost an opportunity to sow the seeds of good relations with Moscow. (Shah 2001)

### India-China war of 1962 and Soviet Union

The second most testing time in the post colonial Indo-Soviet relations came when China attacked India in 1962 along the Himalayan borders and at the same time Khrushchev had a grinding halt in the Cuban missile crisis. Khrushchev found himself in a sort of dilemma on the question of supporting either India a perennial friend or brother China. However, the world proactively supported India with both military aid and much needed moral support. The Chinese contention through the covert military operation was to test the patience and determination of Soviet Union towards India. For china, if Soviet Union supported India militarily or otherwise, it will get western support, and if not then Soviet Union to lose one of its most trusted friends in addition to losing even a impression of independence. Thus, the Chinese threat reinforced what strategic thinkers called "a new realignment in world politics." Dietmar (1969) said in the context "The triangle India- China-Soviet Union emerged as a decisive element of world politics." (Dietmar 1969)

### Nuclearisation, Pakistan and India conflict

Dietmar (1969) counted three broad issues Soviet Union appeared to have walking a tightrope: First, Soviet insistence on India's acceding to NPT (intended to check the nuclearization in South Asia as a consequence of it), second, Soviet arms and weapons supply to Pakistan for bringing the latter on Par with India as envisaged in the Tashkent agreement, and third, the Czech crisis, wherein the then Indian Premier Indira Gandhi endorsed the speech given by his father and India's first Prime Minister before a relative more critical audience. He underscores the change in the India's mood vis-à-vis the nuclear non-proliferation regime the nuclear capability acquired by China in 1964. "The Chinese atomic-bomb test of 1964 has converted India from an enthusiastic supporter of international treaties against further proliferation of nuclear weapons into a conscientious objector to the procedure." (Dietmar 1969)

Later Pakistan turned its weight behind western countries to the detriment of Soviet Union's interest. Here begins the period of Soviet estrangement with Pakistan leading to the natural emergence of India as a sole partner in South Asia. Subsequently Pakistan announced to join the western designed security and military alliance for its benefit. It joined SEATO and CENTO in 1954 and 1955 respectively. The proactivity with which Pakistan joined these military alliances annoyed Moscow which saw these alliances as an instrument of America's containment policy.(ibid) however, these series of moves by Pakistan aimed at enhancing its status vis-à-vis India with the economic and military assistance from the Western countries created a conducive and favorable climate in which the Indo-Soviet Union relation could flourish despite the fact that India espoused the notion of non-alignment in international politics. In these period and in the

subsequent decades USSR tried to maintain what Kaushik (1971) termed a "policy of equi-closeness" rather "policy of equi distance." However, the stance of the latter could not reap benefit for herself because Pakistan rested under the shadow of western palm during the entire period of cold war politics. Though USSR still tried to woo Pakistan on several occasions in vain. It meant Soviet Union was not willing to close its doors for Pakistan completely. (Bakshi 2000)

The stance is evident in the fact that it was Soviet Union which agreed to mediate between India and Pakistan during the Tashkent Declaration summit in which Soviet Union asserted her role as a neutral third power and facilitated the signing of an agreement which was commended by many. However, when the full scale war broke out between India and Pakistan, Soviet Union sided with India. In the aftermath of war, the role played by USSR in catalysing to persuade India and Pakistan to ink an agreement which aimed at maintaining peace and stability was a landmark event in international politics. The also manifested the South Asia connection of USSR simultaneously. (Chakravarty 1990)

Soviet Union had adopted a nonpartisan approach towards the Indo-Pakistan conflict over the conflicting claim by both the parties over Rann of Kutch. It joined hands with other powers viz. Washington and London to pressurize both the claimant to observe restraint and sort out the dispute peacefully, a ceasefire agreement was signed on 27th June, 1965. However, the conflict was dormant for some time and another conflict broke out in 1965 when Pakistan launched its Operation Gibraltar intended to capture Kashmir by way of sending large number of infiltrators armed with modern armaments. (Kux 1993:235.)

On the issue of Kashmir, the Soviet stance was non hawkish. In January, 1948, India took the issue to United Nations for the peaceful resolution under Article 35 of the United Nations Charter, with the complaint of Pakistan's aggressive design against Kashmir. Here Moscow had two options at their disposal: one either India, or the second i.e. to remain neutral. Surprisingly Moscow chose the latter in view of its strategic and geopolitical compulsions. At the same time Moscow did see both the countries' policies in the particular issue not so much different from each other and viewed both the governments as reactionary. It saw both India and Pakistan equally important, for its delegation did not evince interest in participating and debating the issue in the Security Council. (Budhraj 1974:74)

In the later period of time, Soviet stand got a sea change when it came to realize the fact that USA and UK were harboring their own strategic and military interest in the guise of resolving the Kashmir issue. Moscow started criticizing the west on the issue to the benefit of Indian position on Kashmir. Thus when USA and UK nominated Frank P. Graham as an appointee for representation at the United Nations for India and Pakistan, USSR's representative Jacob Malik criticized the move (Jain 1974). Malik said, "instead of speaking a real settlement, were aimed at prolonging the dispute and at converting Kashmir into a trust territory of the US and the UK under the pretext of giving it assistance through the United Nations". In December 1952, the then Soviet representative V. Zorin stressed the earlier position of Soviet Union articulated by Malik.

In the year 1955, Soviet Union and India's relation saw an unprecedented boom when the two heads of the states paid visited each other. Then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his USSR counterpart Nikita Khrushchev exchanged unmatched bonhomie and affirmed the relationship extremely special. In the visit, Khrushchev made one statement which in the subsequent years became a hallmark of Soviet sensitivity towards India's territorial integrity and sovereignty. He said, "That Kashmir is one of the states of Republic of India which has been decided by the people of Kashmir." (Budhraj 1974:122) The mutual visit of heads of states laid the foundation of a relation which in the subsequent years proved to be indestructible and highly matured.

Another milestone in Soviet Union and India relation came when in 1971 India and USSR signed twenty year Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in the month of August. The treaty came against the backdrop of third India Pakistan war which broke out in the 1971 leading to the separation of East and West Pakistan and birth of a new nation state called Bangladesh. The open standing of Soviet Union with India did not go well with Pakistani leadership and they termed interference in their internal affairs. (Shah 2001) it is said that the treaty was signed to deter any attempt by the external powers from making any direct involvement in the conflict.

#### Soviet Union and intervention in Afghanistan

The lowest point in the Soviet-Pakistan relations was yet to be witnessed. It came when the former intervened in Afghanistan in December 1979. The year following the Afghanistan intervention witnessed the worst ever low points in the USSR South Asia connection or engagement. The situation changed only when global strategic and security climate changed epitomized by the end of cold war and as a consequence the rapprochement between USSR and China and to some extent with the west. With the end of cold war Soviet policy towards South Asia changed markedly. (Robert and Nagee 1998: 268). Jyotsna Bakshi (1991) observed that in the changed global strategic and geopolitical environment India did not remain "strategically" significant partner for Moscow against the West and China, which does not seem to be a plausible proposition. India remained and still remains high on the priority list of Moscow even today with a different thrust and rigor.

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